

“Platform” GPPC 1-24-16
Psalm 19, Luke 4:14-21

One of the wonderful things about reading the Bible over the years, is how we’re sometimes surprised to see something we’d not noticed before. Has that ever happened to you? I’d never noticed how Luke places the temptation of Jesus by the devil (Luke 4:1-13) right beside Jesus’ own public announcement of what he stands for and what he will actually be doing (Luke 4:14-21). Had you noticed that before? It’s not an accidental placement, is it?

When we begin Lent in a couple of weeks, we may go back and look more closely at the devil’s sneaky temptations in Luke 4:1-13. But for now those temptations can be boiled down into one sentence. *The devil tempts Jesus to make his calling all about self-aggrandizing power.*

Imagine that, a leader who believes his calling is all about self-aggrandizing power. Imagine a leader who thinks, “It’s all about me, baby. I’ll use my power to brag about myself, to make myself look good, and to get whatever I want for myself. To heck with everybody else.” Imagine such a leader. Where does such “leadership” finally take us? It

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takes us to contempt for others, abuse of the weak, disgust for the stranger, triumph of the bully. Hitler. Mussolini. Stalin. We can name others. A calling based upon self-aggrandizing power takes us to disaster, doesn't it?

But Jesus rejects the devil's platform. And he makes his own platform abundantly clear.

Luke says that after rejecting the devil's temptations, Jesus is "filled with the power of the Spirit." So we know what's coming is certainly not evil. But it's not naiveté either. What's coming is something empowered by the Spirit, something inspired by the living God.

Jesus comes back to Galilee, back home where he grew up. Where people know about him and where people *think* they know him. He comes back home and reports about him "spread through all the surrounding country." Jesus is in demand. He receives an honorary doctorate, starts teaching in the synagogues, and Luke says, he is "praised by everyone." Apparently, the students have not read the

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syllabus, gotten any exams yet, much less any actual grades from the prof.

So Jesus is in the synagogue on the sabbath day “as was his custom.” Yes, even the Lord shows up for worship on a regular basis. Jesus is in the synagogue on the sabbath day “as was his custom.” He stands up, thumbs through the Bible, and finds the passage he’s looking for, a reading from the prophet Isaiah, chapter 61.

Now everybody knows this passage. It’s nothing new. Nothing unusual. It’s been part of the faith tradition for centuries. Nobody’s going to contact the presbytery and file charges for a heresy trial because Jesus is reading this passage from Isaiah. Jesus stands up to read something familiar, something uncontroversial.

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”

Interestingly enough, Jesus leaves out the last part of the quote from Isaiah where it reads, “and the day of vengeance of our God.”

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Maybe Jesus is showing that his emphasis is not upon vengeance but upon justice and mercy.

Jesus finishes reading, rolls up the scroll, gives it back to the attendant, and sits down. And Luke says everybody in the synagogue is staring at Jesus. As one scholar points out, the Greek here usually carries the sense of gazing at somebody with “esteem and trust.” (Joseph Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke I-IX*, 533.) Maybe the people are thinking, “That’s our boy, Jesus. Isn’t it good to have him back home? He did such a nice job reading this morning. And he’s gotten so tall.” Maybe they’re thinking something like that.

But Jesus sits down, the normal posture for teaching in his day. Jesus sits down after reading from Isaiah—good news for the poor, release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, the oppressed going free, the year of the Lord’s favor. And then he says, “*Today* this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”

Clank. Jesus was doing so well, until the last sentence.

Today, all these wonderful things have come true. Today, all these things have been fulfilled in me.

And if we keep reading to the end of the chapter, we'll see that the people stop looking at Jesus with esteem and trust. They start looking at him with hatred. "Just who do you think you are? We know you. Got a little too big for your britches, didn't you, Jesus? You grew up in this neighborhood." And Luke says the people try to throw Jesus off a cliff, but somehow or another he simply passes through their midst and goes on his way.

Why are the people so angry at Jesus? Maybe because his good news is threatening to the status quo. Maybe because he's claiming authority beyond what they expect and feel he deserves. Maybe because they think they know him, have him all figured out and neatly managed, but they do not. So they're enraged by this good news that challenges their assumptions and calls into question the very fabric of their lives.

Maybe we ought to be enraged too, enraged about something else.

Good news to the poor. But one writer reminds us, "The top 1 percent of Americans claims 40 percent of the nation's wealth and 24 percent of its income each year. In 1960 they owned only 9 percent of the wealth. The top 20 percent of Americans possess more than 80

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percent of the wealth. The bottom 80 percent of us have a meager seven percent. CEOs of major corporations are paid 380 times as much as the average worker...Tax rates on the super wealthy plunged from 91 percent in the 1950s to 35 percent today, corporate tax rates from 35 percent in 1945 to 10 percent today.” (E. Glenn Hinson, *Weavings*, Nov.Dec. 2013/Jan. 2014, 20-21.) Meanwhile our children go hungry.

Release to the captives. But as another minister points out, ““The United States has less than 5 percent of the world’s population. But it has almost a quarter of the world’s prisoners.’ We imprison more people than any other nation on earth.” (Lauren Winner and Matt Fitzgerald in *Feasting on the Gospels: Luke, Vol. 1*, 101)

Recovery of sight to the blind. Yet elected representatives in power, people who had responsibility and ability to make things right, turned a blind eye to the citizens of Flint, Michigan, allowing them to drink water contaminated with lead.

To let the oppressed go free. Unless they are adults and children fleeing violence in Central America.

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To proclaim the year of the Lord's favor, meaning the Jubilee year celebrated every 50 years with the land given rest from growing crops, slaves freed, debts cancelled, lands lost in financial emergency returned to original owner. The year of the Lord's favor. Unless we're talking about the crushing "pay day loan" interest rates paid by the poorest among us. Unless we mean college student loan debt keeping many of our young people in near financial bondage.

But Jesus says that the wonderful news proclaimed in Isaiah has been fulfilled "today." How can that be true when we see so much suffering and injustice? How can that be so when the rich get richer and the poor get poorer? How can we believe when there is so much evidence that mocks our belief?

It's not easy, is it? It requires faith. It demands persistence and grit. When Jesus says "today" these desperate human needs have been met in him, he is speaking the future into being. Today it begins. Today with you and me and God's church it continues. And one day today will be complete when human suffering and need are no more. This is Jesus'

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platform. And because it is Jesus' platform it also is the platform for the church.

Good news for the poor. So if you are poor and you live in the Greensboro area, there is a place where you can eat every meal for free. On cold days there is shelter. There are resources to help you get out of poverty. Every year our congregation gives away tens of thousands of dollars and thousands of volunteer hours to Greensboro Urban Ministry and the Interactive Resource Center and the Salvation Army and Habitat for Humanity and the list goes on. We're advocating for strong schools and better wages for low-paid workers. And our work with Bread for the World is challenging our legislators not to cut programs that feed the hungry in our country.

Release to the captives. So we advocate for criminal justice reform to stop our prisons from overflowing with people who are not a threat to society but who need to take better paths with their lives. We're mentoring children and youth so they might grow into more fruitful adults.

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Recovery of sight to the blind. As a community we're having our blindness to racism and homophobia removed. Through public dialogue, articles, and forums we are learning to combat racism. Meanwhile the Human Rights Campaign's Municipal Equality Index rates Greensboro the highest of any city in North and South Carolina as far as treatment of our LGBT brothers and sisters.

Let the oppressed go free. With FaithAction International House, we provide for our immigrant brothers and sisters. And we call our elected officials to pass fair and compassionate comprehensive immigration reform. We pray for the end of the Israeli occupation of Palestine and for the deadly cycle of violence and retaliation in that area of the world to cease. We pray for the dismantling of ISIS and other terrorist groups that these evil persons would see the light.

And we proclaim the year of the Lord's favor. We work for the day when all people have safe places to live, enough food to eat, clean water to drink, decent jobs that pay fair wages, time to rest and play. We work for that day, because it is part of Jesus' platform and part of the church's platform.

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Jesus says the Spirit of God is upon him. The Spirit of God is upon him and in his platform speech Jesus lays out who he is and what he is called to do. Jesus is the Son of God, God's serving, forgiving, healing, truth-speaking love in action.

We, you and I, and followers of Christ throughout the world know that this platform is also our platform. We are called and privileged to respond to human need with the gifts we have and the people we are. And because our calling is part of the calling of Christ, everything we do towards that end matters. It's all part of the justice and mercy of God that has come and is coming.

The Spirit of the Lord is upon us. Let's go serve. Today. Today.

Amen. ©Jeff Paschal